

**Menashe Amir Part 2: Fighting Holocaust Denial with Yad Vashem – English episode transcript
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NARRATOR: Educating people about the Holocaust is a never-ending mission for the Israeli museum of Yad Vashem, also known as the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

The Jerusalem-based institution says Nazi Germany's systematic slaughter of six million Jews and killings of other minorities in the mid-20th century, is more relevant than ever to global society.

It says the Holocaust is a reminder of the potential consequences of modern-day antisemitism and other forms of hatred seen around the world.

Besides the museum, Yad Vashem operates educational websites in eight languages including Farsi, the language of Iran – a country whose leaders, in recent years, have denied the Holocaust happened.

Israeli broadcast journalist Menashe Amir, a native of Iran, partnered with Yad Vashem a decade ago to try to better educate Iranians about the Holocaust.

I met him at the museum in June 2017 to find out how that effort has turned out.

Michael Lipin (ML): So, Menashe Amir, we are in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem. This is the first point of the exhibition hall that you wanted to show us. What is the significance of this place?

Menashe Amir (MA): We see here the rise of antisemitism, inside Germany, and the Juden, and that the Jews have been boycotted by the Nazis. And little by little we go to the Warsaw Ghetto, and the transportation of the Jews into concentration camps. And many parts which are catastrophic to see. You can see in this museum also the life – the cultural, the flourishing life of Jews in commerce, in culture, in music, in art. And then the Germans came and they demolished all, and they wanted to annihilate all the Jews.

ML: What is important for people to understand about the rise of Nazism?

MA: What we have to understand is to prevent it. The main cause of building this place and this exhibition is to show the atrocities, the inhuman actions and the events, and to prevent in the future, catastrophes like that.

NARRATOR: One of the biggest catastrophes happened at the Nazi German death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1941 to 1945. Yad Vashem says 1.1 million Jews were murdered there.

ML: So Menashe, here we have a model of the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Tell us about this model, here.

MA: That's a wonderful model that explains all the steps of how the Jews have been brought into the concentration camp and they have been (suffocated) and then burned, and so on. This is the selection part, that once the Jews came to the concentration camp, the Nazi officers have been selecting who will remain in life, and who will be sent to the gas chambers. And here we see the people who have been condemned to death, brought here, little by little, and then this is the gas chamber.

And these are the other parts of the...

ML: The other parts of the camp, where the people who were allowed to live had to do other tasks?

MA: Yes, they have to work and to service and to have a hard work, for just keeping (up) the concentration camp, and also helping the Nazis' industry to build weapons and war equipment.

ML: And probably the most disturbing part of the model is, you look at the chamber itself, and these chambers really were so packed full of people?

MA: Yes of course, because every time a few hundred people have been brought into the gas chamber and killed, and then sent to be burned and to be totally vanished. It's a new model that has been here for only the last few years. And very much it demonstrated the awfulness of the Germans' crimes against the Jews.

NARRATOR: A few steps away from the Auschwitz model, the Jewish victims of Nazi crimes are remembered, individually.

MA: So, we are going to the Hall of Names.

ML: This is one of the highlights of the museum.

MA: Of course.

MA: So, you see here the pictures of some people who have been killed. Children, women, men.

ML: People of all ages.

MA: Yes. And we have here a part of archives with the names of people who have been killed, and they already have more than 4 million names...

ML: Out of the six million, who were killed?

MA: Six million, yes. And they are continuing their effort, to recognize everybody, and they have been helped by families.

ML: How has the museum been able to get so many names?

MA: Because they have so many researchers, and also the help of families of the victims.

ML: Who provide documents and information.

MA: And we have to take into consideration that every Jewish community in every city and small villages, they have books, names and things like that. And besides that, the Germans have been very effective in this regard.

ML: So the Nazis, kind of unwittingly, by doing all this documentation themselves, have helped the Jewish people to commemorate all those who were killed...

MA: ...to commemorate the names of the victims.

NARRATOR: The faces of 600 of those victims are displayed on a cone-shaped ceiling, rising 10 meters toward the sky.

The portraits are reflected beneath the ceiling, in a pool of water, at the base of another cone that is carved into the bedrock of a mountain.

On a forested hill outside the exhibition hall, we approach another Yad Vashem monument.

Known as the Garden of the Righteous among the Nations, it honors the saving of some of Europe's Jews from the Holocaust, with the help of their non-Jewish neighbors.

MA: The significance is that all the non-Jews who have helped to rescue the Jews during the war and endangered their own lives are commemorated here. And their names and the deeds. And this is a kind of appreciation of the Jewish people towards non-Jews who have endangered their lives.

NARRATOR: Amir began a partnership with Yad Vashem in 2007, at a time when the commemoration of Holocaust heroes and victims was being ridiculed by Israel's main regional foe, the Iranian government.

Then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had repeatedly called the Holocaust a "myth". He said the international community used it as a "pretext" for creating Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran, February 11, 2006:

"As I have said before, as far as several aggressive European governments are concerned, and as far as the Great Satan (the US) is concerned, it is permissible to harm the honor of the divine prophets, but it is a crime to ask questions about the myth of the Holocaust, and about how the false regime occupying Palestine came into being."

NARRATOR: Ahmadinejad's government also had hosted a conference in December 2006 for Holocaust deniers and skeptics from various countries.

MA: You know, denying the Holocaust is a part of the Iranian revolutionary, Islamic government. And especially when Ahmadinejad came into power.

ML: The former Iranian president.

MA: As a president, he denied very loudly the Holocaust for political reasons. The Iranians thought that denying the Holocaust and denying the existence of Israel will help them to get a better influence inside the Muslim and Arab countries. And they have been wrong. So, after Ahmadinejad's speech, Yad Vashem, or Holocaust museum, decided to make a Farsi website, just to let the Iranians know what the Holocaust means and what happened to Jews and how they have been exterminated.

ML: So, what did you do exactly, for the website?

MA: They asked me to write the history of the Holocaust, the different steps, and how the Germans came into power, and how every country that they have conquered – one of the first actions was to get together all the Jews and to send them to concentration camps and to kill them.

ML: So, you were not actually translating content from the English website, you were actually writing your own original work. How did you get the information to do that – was it just your own research?

MA: Exactly. The main aim was writing whatever the Iranians need to know about, not Europeans, not Americans. So I made the research, and there are plenty of books about the Holocaust. I read them, and I decided what to write, and how to do it, because we had to put it in a concise form.

NARRATOR: After launching a Farsi website in 2007, Yad Vashem expanded its outreach to Iranians by creating a Farsi YouTube channel in 2011.

Yad Vashem posted 42 clips, mostly of Holocaust survivors describing their experiences with Farsi subtitles.

Then-Israeli President Shimon Peres also appeared on the site, with a message to Iranians.

Shimon Peres, January 22, 2011:

"History is rich in events, but there is one event which is exceptional, which is a watershed and that is the Holocaust, when a cultured nation in an organized manner killed six million people because they were Jewish, including a million-and-a-half babies and children. What we suggest is, that each of you will see the material, which is based on records, on photos, on registration, to understand what happened, and also to be able to tell your own children to beware, not to let history fall again to such a depth, to such a shame. Thank you very much."

NARRATOR: The YouTube channel launch drew international interest at a media event hosted by Yad Vashem's chairman, Avner Shalev.

Avner Shalev, Jerusalem, January 23, 2011:

"The main target of this effort is actually to bring to truth to hundreds of thousands of Persian speakers all around the world and specifically in Iran, to fight and to combat the Holocaust denial that is now spreading all over. Because we know that it is in the interest of the Iranian people to know objectively about the Holocaust through this very important tool."

NARRATOR: Amir says Yad Vashem's Farsi-language Internet tools got a positive response, especially when the website debuted in 2007.

MA: In the beginning, it was very much thousands of people who entered (the Farsi website) each day or each week to read about the Holocaust. But lately, I think that there is less and less, because there is more knowledge inside Iran about the Holocaust. And I have to mention that Ahmadinejad, and even Ali Khamenei, the leader of the country, have denied on several occasions the Holocaust. But most of the Iranians know what Holocaust means, and what was the fate of Jews in Europe. And the Voice of Israel also helped in this regard. We had many talks and reports about the Holocaust – the history, the background, and so on.

NARRATOR: Amir was a longtime host of Farsi programs for the Voice of Israel – the Israeli government’s international radio service.

It ended the Farsi broadcasts in May 2017 as part of a reform of Israeli state broadcasting.

When he was on the air, Amir regularly took calls from Iran, answering listeners’ questions about the Holocaust.

Amir says Iranians also have had other sources of information to improve their Holocaust knowledge in the past few years.

MA: First of all, the United Nations decision about Holocaust Day was very helpful in this regard.

Antonio Guterres, U.N. Secretary-General, January 27, 2017:

“After the horrors of the 20th century, there should be no room for intolerance in the 21st. I guarantee you that as secretary-general of the United Nations, I will be in the front line of the battle against antisemitism, and all other forms of hatred.”

MA: In fact, Ahmadinejad and Ali Khamenei got the opposite result of their denying of the Holocaust. And now the Iranians are very much interested to know about (it).

There is another website – Aladdin – in several languages including Farsi – who give other aspects of the Holocaust – the story of people who have been exterminated, and the lives of those who have remained.

NARRATOR: The website is part of the Aladdin Project, an international non-governmental organization based in Paris.

It was created in 2009 by a private French foundation called the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah – the Hebrew word for Holocaust.

The Aladdin Project has translated Holocaust books, films and websites into languages of Muslim-majority nations in which there has been little or no Holocaust education. Iran is one of those nations.

The Iranian government’s approach toward the Holocaust also has shifted since 2013, when Hassan Rouhani succeeded Ahmadinejad as Iran’s president.

U.S. TV network CNN asked Rouhani about the Holocaust when he visited the United Nations in New York in September of that year.

A CNN translation shows Rouhani responded by saying:

“The crime the Nazis committed toward the Jews as well as non-Jewish people is reprehensible and condemnable”.

But Rouhani did not refer to that crime as the “Holocaust” specifically.

Two days later, Rouhani addressed the topic again, this time at the Asia Society educational organization in New York.

Hassan Rouhani speaking in Farsi, New York, September 26, 2013, 2013:

"We condemn the crimes by Nazis in World War Two and regrettably those crimes were committed against many groups. Many people were killed, including a group of Jewish people. And we condemn their crimes. In general, we condemn the murder and killing of innocent people. It makes no difference to us when that person is innocent and is killed, whether he or she was Jewish or Christian or Muslim."

NARRATOR: It was another instance of Rouhani declining to use 'Holocaust' in his words of condemnation.

MA: As far as I know, he didn't have any clarified declaration about the Holocaust. But he said that this is a matter that doesn't connect to us, and it's better not to talk about it. And somehow and some way, he said that the Holocaust existed. The clearest declaration was made by Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who said that the Holocaust existed and there is not any need to deny it, and it's better for the Iranians not to deny the Holocaust.

NARRATOR: Javad Zarif spoke about the Holocaust with U.S. TV network ABC in September 2013, equating the mass murder with Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

In an interview on the program *This Week*, he said:

"The point is, we condemn the killing of innocent people, whether it happened in Nazi Germany or whether it's happening in Palestine. One crime, however heinous -- and Holocaust was a heinous crime, it was a genocide, it must never be allowed to be repeated. But that crime cannot be, and should not be, a justification to trample the rights of the Palestinian people for 60 years."

ML: Why do you think the foreign minister, Javad Zarif, said that?

MA: Because he's the foreign minister, and he's in charge of improving the relationship between Iran and other countries. And Ahmadinejad was the president who wanted to get inside the Islamic and Arab world by denying the Holocaust, and by calling (for) the demolition of Israel.

NARRATOR: Despite the shift in tone by some Iranian officials, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has not changed his view of the Holocaust.

Khamenei's official website shows him spelling Holocaust with a lower-case "h" and calling it "the myth of the massacre of Jews" in a 2006 speech. The transcript containing those words has [remained online](#).

The Khamenei.IR website also marked 2016's International Holocaust Remembrance Day by [posting a video](#) in which he calls the West ignorant for punishing people who question the Holocaust.

Ali Khamenei, January 27, 2016:

"No one in European countries dares to speak about holocaust. While it is not clear whether the core of this matter is a reality or not. Even if it is a reality, it is not clear how it happened. Speaking about holocaust and expressing doubts about it is considered to be a great sin. If someone does this, they stop, arrest, imprison and subdue him. This is while they claim to be the supporters of freedom."

NARRATOR: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has long accused Iran's leaders not only of fueling antisemitism, but also of pursuing nuclear activities that could threaten Israel with nuclear bombs. Iran rejects such accusations.

Israel's former long-serving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Iran's leaders not only of fueling antisemitism, but also of pursuing nuclear activities that could threaten Israel with nuclear bombs. Iran rejects such accusations.

Netanyahu reiterated his view of Iranian policies as an existential threat to the Jewish state when he spoke at Yad Vashem in April 2017, on Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Benjamin Netanyahu speaking in Hebrew, Jerusalem, April 23, 2017

"Next to the antisemitism that is rediscovered in the West, a new fierce hatred is exploding from the East – the antisemitism of extreme Islam. Its two factions – led by Iran and the Islamic State – are publicly striving to destroy us."

NARRATOR: But Amir says Iran's practice of denying or questioning the Holocaust has not had the desired impact on its Arab neighbors.

MA: One reason – because they know that the Holocaust existed.

ML: So they don't really deny it, in Saudi Arabia, in Egypt, Jordan – those kinds of countries?

MA: There are many sheikhs and religious leaders in Arab countries and Muslim countries who deny the Holocaust – they claim that it didn't exist, it didn't happen. But the Iranians' aim was... they wanted to dominate the Muslim world. And no Sunni Muslims pay attention to what the Iranians say.

NARRATOR: Shi'ite-majority Iran has been helping Shi'ite armed groups like Hezbollah, seen here fighting in Syria.

Iran's assistance to similar groups fighting in Syria... Lebanon... Iraq... and Yemen has led Sunni Arab states like Saudi Arabia to see Tehran as a regional threat.

The questioning of the Holocaust by Iran's leadership also has not stopped Iranians from visiting Yad Vashem itself to learn what happened. Amir has seen their reactions in person.

MA: Listen, for Iranians citizens coming to Israel - is forbidden. But, we have many, many Iranians who live in Europe or in the United States or Canada, and they can come here. I accompanied people who came to the Holocaust museum, and they cried. It was unbelievable how they have their emotion and their solidarity with the Jews, and with Israel.

NARRATOR: I asked Amir whether any of those Iranians had changed their minds about history.

MA: They knew some facts about the Holocaust. But once they come, and they see so many pictures and movies, they are much more emotional, and they understand the deep catastrophe and the deep crimes of the Nazi Germany. And they hate also the Iranian regime, who is going to deny the Holocaust.

Q: Looking ahead, Yad Vashem still has a Farsi website, changed some of the content over the last couple of years, and you are no longer contributing to the website. But what else would you like to see Yad Vashem do, and other organizations do, in terms of educating people about the Holocaust, especially Iranians?

MA: I think that the website – the one that I made and the other one who replaced it – is not enough. The story of the Holocaust is a big, big story. We have now somebody in the United States, Dr. Ardeshtir Babaknia, who wrote a four-volume book about the Holocaust, with many pictures. I would like to put it online and in the Yad Vashem website. But Yad Vashem, they think that a little content is enough for them.

NARRATOR: Babaknia, an Iranian-American Jewish physician specializing in women's health, published the four-volume Holocaust in Farsi in 2012.

He had spent 15 years leading a team of researchers in Holocaust studies to produce what he called the first comprehensive book about the tragedy in the Farsi language.

I asked Yad Vashem if it would consider using Babaknia's book. The museum responded by saying that it has no plans to add new content to its [Farsi website](#).

ML: What other kinds of efforts do you think need to be made in terms of Holocaust education?

MA: There is no end of the projects and things that have to be done for remembering the Holocaust. Not only remembering, but feeling the depth of the crime. Just for preventing the similar crimes in future. I think that many movies, many other books, many online websites, are helping in this regard.

ML: Menashe Amir, thank you so much for giving us a little tour of the important exhibits here today at Yad Vashem, and giving us an idea of what Iranians know about the Holocaust today, as compared to previous years. I really appreciate it.

MA: Thank you very much. I thank you for coming and making this nice report, because the Holocaust issue is very important, and we hope that once every man in the world will realize how criminal was this event, maybe the humanity will prevent a repeat of this kind of atrocities.

ML: I hope so, thank you.

MA: Thank you.